

# MANET'S IRONIC DUPLICITY

HAMLET, BAUDELAIRE,  
AND MASCULINITY

**James H. Rubin**



Series in Art



VERNON PRESS

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I dedicate this book first to my extraordinary wife, Liliane,  
as well as to the other members of my wonderful family.  
Their love and their support for my research and writing  
have been a huge source of strength over these many years.



# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>LIST OF FIGURES</b>	vii
<b>ABOUT THE AUTHOR</b>	xv
<b>PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS</b>	xvii
<b>INTRODUCTION: RETHINKING MANET</b>	1
<b>I. A QUESTIONABLE PERFORMANCE</b>	9
<b>II. CONTEXTS: THE DUAL SELF AND SECOND EMPIRE CENSORSHIP</b>	25
<b>III. STAGE MASTER: PAINTING AS THEATER</b>	51
<b>IV. ACTORS AS PROTOTYPES</b>	83
<b>V. GENDERED PERFORMANCES AND AMBIGUOUS AGENCY</b>	103
<b>VI. SELF-RECOGNITION: MIRRORS, REVERSALS, AND REVELATIONS</b>	135
<b>VII. MEANS AND MEANINGS</b>	163
<b>VIII. LEADERSHIP IN IMAGINATION VERSUS REALISM</b>	179
<b>IX. HAMLET AND MODERN IRONY</b>	205
<b>X. MASCULINE DISSIMULATIONS</b>	217
<b>CONCLUSION: PORTRAITS OF ABSENCE</b>	241
<b>APPENDIX</b>	255

<b>SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY</b>	265
<b>NOTES</b>	269
<b>INDEX</b>	311

# LIST OF FIGURES

All works are by Édouard Manet and are in oil on canvas unless otherwise noted. Measurements are in centimeters. All illustrations are of works in the public domain.

1. *Jean-Baptiste Faure as Hamlet*, 1877, 194 x 131.5, Museum Folkwang, Essen. 9
2. Anonymous, *Jean-Baptiste Faure*, Woodburytype, 1870s, The National Portrait Gallery, London. 10
3. Charles Le Brun, *Expressive Head: La Douleur*, from *Expressions des passions de l'âme*, engraving, Paris: Jean Audran graveur, 1727, pl. 10, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Fonds Arsenal, Paris. 11
4. Cham (Charles-Amédé de Noé), "Hamlet, devenu fou, se fait peindre par M. Manet," from *Le Charivari*, 23 May 1877, p. 3. 14
5. Alfred de Neuville, lithographed by Émile Vernier, cover to Ambroise Thomas, *Hamlet*, opera in 5 acts, Paris: Heugel, 1868. 16
6. L. Calabresi, *Jean-Baptiste Faure as Mephistopheles in Faust*, 1860s, carte de visite photograph, The National Portrait Gallery, London. 17
7. "Être ou ne pas être, Ô mystère," Ambroise Thomas, *Hamlet*, opéra en cinq actes, paroles de Jules Barbier et Michel Carré, Paris: Heugel et Cie, ed., 1869, p. 334. 19
8. *Portrait of Antonin Proust*, 1880, 129.5 x 95.9, The Toledo Museum of Art, Ohio. 31
9. *Portrait of Georges Clemenceau at the Tribune*, 1879–1880, 115.9 x 88.2, The Kimbell Art Museum, Fort Worth. 32
10. *Portrait of Henri Rochefort*, 1881, 81.5 x 66.5, Kunsthalle, Hamburg. 33
11. *The Escape of Rochefort*, 1881, 143 x 114, Kunsthhaus, Zurich. 34

12. *The Old Musician*, 1862, 187 x 248.2, The National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. 35
13. Gustave Courbet, *The Artist's Studio, A Real Allegory Summing Up Seven Years of My Artistic and Moral Life*, 1854–1855, 361 x 598, Musée d'Orsay, Paris. 36
14. *Portrait of His Parents, Monsieur et Madame Manet*, 1860, 111.5 x 91, Musée d'Orsay, Paris. 38
15. *Concert in the Tuileries Garden*, 1862, 76 x 118, shared by The National Gallery, London and The Hugh Lane Dublin City Gallery, Dublin. 40
16. *The Balloon*, lithograph, 1862, 40.3 x 51.5, The Harvard Art Museums, Cambridge, Massachusetts. 41
17. Diego Velázquez, *The Court Buffoon 'El Primo,'* 1644, 106.5 x 82.5, Museo del Prado, Madrid. 42
18. Antoine-Jean Gros, *Napoleon on the Battlefield at Eylau*, 1808, 521 x 784 Musée du Louvre, Paris. 44
19. Two fragments from *The Bullfight*, 1864: *Bullfight*, 50 x 109, The Frick Collection, New York and *The Dead Toreador*, 75.9 x 153.3, The National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. 45
20. *The Battle between the U.S.S. Kearsarge and the C.S.S. Alabama*, 1864, 134 x 127, The Philadelphia Museum of Art. 46
21. *The Execution of Emperor Maximilian on 19 June 1867*, 1868, 252 x 302, Kunsthalle, Mannheim. 49
22. *The Execution of Maximilian on 19 June 1867*, lithograph, 1868, 34 x 43.8, The Metropolitan Museum, New York. 50
23. *The Theater of Polichinelle*, etching, second frontispiece for *Eaux-Fortes par Édouard Manet*, 1862, 29.5 x 21.1, The New York Public Library. 52
24. Jean-Antoine Watteau, *Pierrot* (formerly known as *Gilles*), 1718–1719, 184 x 149, Musée du Louvre, Paris. 54
25. *The Absinthe Drinker*, 1859, 180.5 x 105.6, Ny Carlsberg Glyptothek, Copenhagen. 55
26. *The Spanish Singer* or *The Guitarrero*, 1860, 147.3 x 114.3, The Metropolitan Museum, New York. 57



27. Diego Velázquez, *Los Borrachos* [The Drinkers], or *The Feast of Bacchus*, 1628–1629, 165 x 224, Museo del Prado, Madrid. 58
28. *Boy with Sword*, 1861, 131.1 x 93.3, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. 59
29. *The Fifer Boy*, 1866, 160.5 x 97, Musée d'Orsay, Paris. 60
30. *Lola de Valence*, 1862, 123 x 92, Musée d'Orsay, Paris. 63
31. *The Street Singer*, 1862, 171.1 x 105.8, The Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. 64
32. *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe*, [*The Picnic* or *Luncheon on the Grass* (original title *Le Bain*)], 1862–1863, 208 x 264.5, Musée d'Orsay, Paris 67
33. *Mlle. V... in the Costume of an Espada*, 1862, 165.1 x 127.6, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. 68
34. *Young Man in the Costume of a Majo*, 1863, 188 x 124.8, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. 69
35. *Caricature view of the Salon des Refusés*, 1863. Photograph by Camille Rensch, Photographie de la Madeleine, Paris, of a drawing by Fabritzius. Albumen print. (Private Collection) Source: Google, s.v. Salon de Refusés. 70
36. James Abbot McNeill Whistler, *Symphony in White, No. 1: The White Girl*, 1861–1862, 213 x 107.9, The National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. 71
37. *Portrait of Victorine Meurent*, c. 1862, 42.9 x 43.8, The Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. 73
38. Joseph Ducreux, *Self-Portrait as a Moqueur*, 1793, 91.5 x 72.5, Musée du Louvre, Paris. 79
39. Henri Fantin-Latour, *Portrait of Édouard Manet*, 1867, 117.5 x 90, The Art Institute of Chicago. 81
40. *The Tragic Actor: Philibert Rouvière as Hamlet*, 1865–1866, 187.2 x 108.1, The National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. 89
41. Eugène Delacroix, *Hamlet and Horatio at the Graveyard*, 1839, 81.5 x 65.4, Musée du Louvre, Paris. 90
42. Francisco de Goya y Lucientes, *Portrait of the Duchess of Alba*, 1797, 191 x 130, The Hispanic Society of America, New York. 93

43. William Hogarth, *Portrait of David Garrick Playing Richard III*, 1745, 190.5 x 250.8, The Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool. 97
44. Oil sketch for *Portrait of Faure as Hamlet*, 1877, 196 x 129, Kunsthalle, Hamburg. 98
45. Study for *Faure as Hamlet*, pastel, c. 1877, 46 x 56, Current whereabouts unknown. (Reproduced from Denis Rouart and Daniel Wildenstein, *Édouard Manet, catalogue raisonné*, Lausanne: La Bibliothèque des Arts, 1975, II, pastels, aquarelles et dessins, no. 4, p. 3.) 100
46. *Olympia*, 1863, 130.5 x 190, Musée d'Orsay, Paris. 107
47. *Woman with a Fan*, Jeanne Duval, 1862, 90 x 113, Szépművészeti Múzeum, Budapest. 108
49. *The Balcony*, 1868–1869, 170 x 125, Musée d'Orsay, Paris. 114
50. *Resting: Berthe Morisot in her Studio*, 1870, 150.2 x 114, Rhode Island School of Design Museum, Providence RI. 117
51. *Portrait of Eva Gonzalès*, 1869–1870, 133 x 191, The National Gallery, London. 118
52. Berthe Morisot, *Self-Portrait*, 1885, 50 x 61, Musée Marmottan-Monet, Paris. 120
53. *Portrait of Berthe Morisot with a Muff*, 1872, 74 x 60, The Cleveland Museum of Art. 121
54. *Bouquet of Violets with a Fan*, 1872, 27 x 22, Private Collection. 122
55. *Berthe Morisot with a Fan*, 1872, 60.4 x 45.2, Musée d'Orsay, Paris. 123
56. *Berthe Morisot with a Bouquet of Violets*, 1872, 55 x 38, Musée d'Orsay, Paris. 125
57. *Berthe Morisot*, etching, 2<sup>nd</sup> state, 1872, 11.9 x 7.9, The Metropolitan Museum, New York. 126
58. *Berthe Morisot in a Mourning Hat*, 1874, 60 x 48, Private Collection. 127
59. *Self-Portrait with Palette*, 1878–1879, 83 x 67, Private Collection. 131

60. *A Beggar with Oysters*, 1865–1868, 187.3 x 108,  
The Art Institute of Chicago. 136
61. *The Ragpicker*, 1865–1870, 194.9 x 130.8, The Norton Simon  
Museum, Pasadena. 137
62. *Nana*, 1877, 154 x 115, Kunsthalle, Hamburg. 141
63. *Before the Mirror*, 1876, 93 x 71.6, Solomon R. Guggenheim  
Museum, New York, Thannhauser Collection, Gift, Justin K.  
Thannhauser, 1978. 142
64. Berthe Morisot, *Woman at Her Toilette*, 1870–1876, 60.3 x 80.4,  
The Art Institute of Chicago. 143
65. *The Dead Christ with Angels*, 1864, 179 x 150, The Metropolitan  
Museum of Art, New York. 146
66. *Self-Portrait, Standing*, c. 1879, 94 x 63, The Bridgestone  
Museum, Tokyo. 147
67. *A Masked Ball at the Opera*, 1873–1874, 59.1 x 72.5, The National  
Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. 149
68. *Civil War*, lithograph, 1871–1871, published 1874, 39.7 x 50.8,  
The New York Public Library. 151
69. *Young Lady with a Parrot*, 1866, 185.1 x 128.6,  
The Metropolitan Museum, New York. 153
70. *Polichinelle*, 1874, color lithograph, 50 x 34.8, The National  
Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. 155
71. Honoré Daumier, *Baissez le rideau, la farce est jouée*  
(*Lower the Curtain, the Farce Has Ended*), lithograph,  
1834, 20 x 27.8, Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven,  
The Arthur Ross Collection. 156
72. Goya, *Nadie se conoce*, etching and aquatint, no. VI, in  
*Los Caprichos*, Madrid: 1797–1798, 21.4 x 15.1,  
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. 158
73. *Rue Mosnier with Flags*, 1878, 65.4 x 80, The J. Paul Getty  
Museum, Los Angeles. 161
74. *Luncheon in the Studio*, 1868, 118 x 153.9, Neue Pinakothek,  
Munich. 169

- |   |     |
|---|-----|
| 75. Fantin-Latour, <i>A Studio in Batignolles</i> , 1870, 2730 x 2040,<br>Musée d'Orsay, Paris.   | 179 |
| 76. <i>Claude Monet Painting with his Wife in the Boat-Studio</i> ,<br>1874, 82.7 x 105, Neue Pinakothek, Munich.   | 180 |
| 77. <i>The Railway: La Gare Saint-Lazare</i> , 1873–1874, 93.3 x 111.5,<br>The National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. National<br>Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. | 185 |
| 78. <i>In the Conservatory</i> , 1879, 115 x 150, Nationalgalerie,<br>Staatlichen Museen zu Berlin, Preussischer Kulturbesitz.  | 187 |
| 79. <i>Boating</i> , 1874, 97.2 x 130.2, The Metropolitan Museum of Art,<br>New York.   | 189 |
| 80. Edgar Degas, <i>L'Absinthe</i> , or <i>At the Café</i> , 1875–1876,<br>Musée d'Orsay, Paris.  | 191 |
| 81. <i>Argenteuil</i> , 1874, 149 x 115, Musée des Beaux-Arts, Tournai.   | 192 |
| 82. <i>Plum Brandy</i> , 1878, 73.6 x 50.2, The National Gallery of Art,<br>Washington, D.C.  | 199 |
| 83. <i>Chez Le Père Lathuille</i> , 1879, 92 x 112,<br>Musée des Beaux-Arts, Tournai.   | 201 |
| 84. <i>Portrait of M. Pertuiset, the Lion Hunter</i> , 1880–1881, 150 x 170,<br>Museu de Arte, São Paulo.   | 203 |
| 85. Diego Velázquez, <i>Portrait of Pablo de Valladolid</i> , c. 1635,<br>209 x 123, Museo del Prado, Madrid.   | 207 |
| 86. <i>A Bundle of Asparagus</i> , 1880, 46 x 55, Wallraf-Richartz<br>Museum, Cologne.  | 219 |
| 87. <i>Still-Life with Lemon</i> , 1880, 14 x 21, Musée d'Orsay, Paris.   | 220 |
| 88. <i>Pinks and Clematis in a Crystal Vase</i> , c. 1882, 56 x 35,<br>Musée d'Orsay, Paris.  | 221 |
| 89. <i>Flowers in a Crystal Vase</i> , 1882, 32.7 x 24.5, The National<br>Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.  | 222 |
| 90. <i>Roses in a Champagne Glass</i> , 1882, 31 x 24, The Burrell<br>Collection, Glasgow.  | 223 |
| 91. <i>Spring, Portrait of Jeanne Demarsy</i> , 1881–1882, 74 x 51.5,<br>The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles.   | 225 |

92. <i>Portrait of Irma Brunner: La Viennoise</i> , 1880, pastel on board, 54 x 46, Musée du Louvre, Cabinet des Dessins, Paris.	226
93. <i>Madame Manet in the Conservatory</i> , 1879, 100 x 81, Najionalmuseet, Oslo.	227
94. <i>Madame Manet with a Cat</i> , 1880, 92.1 x 73, The Tate Modern, London.	229
95. <i>Portrait of Madame Jules Guillemet</i> , pastel on canvas, 54.8 x 35.2, 1880, The Saint Louis Museum of Art.	230
96. Letter to Madame Jules Guillemet, pen and watercolor on wove paper, 1880, 20 x 25, Private Collection.	231
97. Letter to Mademoiselle Marguerite, pen and watercolor on wove paper, 1880, 20.1 x 12, The Morgan Library and Museum, New York.	232
98. <i>Portrait of Isabelle Lemonnier</i> , [signed with a rose], 1879, pastel on canvas, 55.9 x 46.4, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.	235
99. <i>Portrait of Isabelle Lemonnier with a Muff</i> , 1879–1880, 93 x 73.7, The Dallas Museum of Art.	236
100. <i>Isabelle [?] at the Beach, Diving</i> , 1880, watercolor, 20 x 12.3, Musée du Louvre, Cabinet des Dessins, Paris.	238
101. <i>"Philippine,"</i> 1880, watercolor, 20 x 12.5, Musée du Louvre, Cabinet des Dessins, Paris.	239
102. <i>The Bench in the Garden</i> , 1881, 65.1 x 81.3, Private Collection.	242
103. <i>The House in Rueil</i> , 1882, 92.8 x 73.5, The National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne.	244
104. <i>The House in Rueil</i> , 1882, 71.5 x 92.3, Alte Nationalgalerie, Berlin.	245
105. <i>A Bar at the Folies-Bergère</i> , 1881–82, 96 x 130, The Courtauld Institute Galleries, London.	247
106. Sketch for <i>A Bar at the Folies-Bergère</i> , 1881, 47 x 56, Private Collection. (Formerly on loan to The Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam.)	248

107. Reconstruction of *Au Café*, 1878, 78 x 84, Collection Oskar Reinhardt "Am Romerholz," Winterthur (left) and *Coin de Café-Concert*, 97.1 x 77.5, The National Gallery, London, from Juliet Wilson-Bareau and Malcolm Park, *Manet Trifft Manet: Geteilt, Weidervereint*, exh. cat., Winterthur: Collection Oskar Reinhardt, 2005, p. 28. 249

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

James Rubin is one of the world's foremost specialists in the history, theory, and criticism of nineteenth-century avant-garde European Art, especially that of France. His interests are interdisciplinary, with special attention to cultural history, art and politics, and art and philosophy. Born in Cambridge, Massachusetts, he was taken by his mother to Boston's Museum of Fine Arts and the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum at a young age. He was educated at Phillips Academy Andover, where he discovered the Addison Gallery, Yale (B.A.), where he first discovered art history. From there, and during the Vietnam War, he went to Paris to study at the Institut d'Art et d'Archéologie of the Sorbonne (license-ès-lettres in art history), returning to Harvard University for his PhD (1972). He has taught at Harvard, Boston University, Princeton University, The Cooper Union, and Stony Brook, the State University of New York, from which he is now retired. He has published over 70 articles and essays on subjects ranging from the eighteenth century to the present. He has given over 80 public lectures in North America, Western and Eastern Europe, and Asia. He is the author of 16 published books on Impressionism and on artists such as Eugène Delacroix, Gustave Courbet, Édouard Manet, Claude Monet, and Paul Cezanne. Several of these have been translated into other languages, including French, Greek, Korean, Japanese, and Dutch. He travels frequently, speaks fluent French, and lives in Manhattan, New York and Mittelbergheim, Alsace. He is a dual national, married to Liliane Béatrix Braesch of Strasbourg, France. Their son, Henry-Alex, is a cineaste for Smuggler and a winner of an Oscar nomination and many other awards. The daughter, Delphine McNeill, is a fashionista and co-founder of Livotte Tops, Ltd. In London. Their Boston Terrier's name is Texas Pete.





*[Hamlet] is the funereal being we are all.*

—Victor Hugo, William Shakespeare<sup>1</sup>

*A work of art does not answer questions, it provokes them; and its essential meaning is in the tension between the contradictory answers.*

—Leonard Bernstein<sup>2</sup>

*Conflicts of values may be an intrinsic, irremovable element in human life ... the possibility of conflict—and of tragedy—can never wholly be eliminated.*

—Isaiah Berlin, “Two Concepts of Liberty”<sup>3</sup>

*I define modernism as any attempt by modern men and women to become subjects as well as objects of modernization, to get a grip on the modern world and make themselves at home in it.*

—Marshall Berman, *All that is Solid Melts into Air*<sup>4</sup>



# PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

*Manet's Ironic Duplicity* has had a long period of gestation and revisiting. Before I became an art historian, I studied French literature and history, eventually discovering not only that art history could combine both but also coming to believe that art can be understood as the material manifestation of a culture, albeit seen from an individual's particular viewpoint. Since my early articles on art and theater during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, I have always pursued the relationship between culture and politics through interdisciplinary and cultural studies. Since those narrow beginnings, my focus on art and politics and on politics and culture has both intensified and broadened. Relatively short and jargon-free, this book attempts to bridge the gap between professional and more general readings of both art and literature.

I first saw Manet's *Portrait of Jean-Baptiste Faure as Hamlet* (Figure 1) on a trip to the Folkwang Museum in Essen, Germany, in 2010, where, thanks to Françoise Cachin and Hartwig Fischer, I participated in the exhibition *Bilder einer Metropole*, which was partly based on my research on industrial and urban landscapes published in 2008. I first presented a sketch of this project focusing on *Hamlet* as part of a graduate seminar I taught at Stony Brook University in the same year as the visit to Essen. It took further shape thanks to Karin Westerwelle of the Universität Münster, who invited me to an interdisciplinary symposium on Baudelaire there in early 2014. In 2015, the late Sarah Lippert invited me to present an early short version as a keynote lecture for the Society of Paragone Studies at the Flint Institute of the Arts in Michigan. In 2016, Shao-Chien Tseng invited me to give seminars in Taiwan, and I was also asked to do so in Japan thanks to Nuriko Murai, Takanori Nagai, and Megumi Jingaoka. Following all these presentations, I received a number of useful comments, and I want to express my deep gratitude to all of those students and organizers. Although I soon became involved in several other projects, the book continued to evolve in my mind. I am immensely grateful for the many useful suggestions from Nicole Georgopulos, Therese Dolan, Michael Tilby, and especially Michelle Foa. I also want to thank Leah Lehmbeck, Isolde Pludermacher, and Rebecca Federman for helping me with research, including looking directly at works by Manet.

My gratitude also goes to the team at Vernon Press: Sonia Costa, Argiris Legatos, Irene Benavides, Dessy Vassileva, and Javier Rodriguez for their excellent editorial work, responsiveness, and patience with my requests. It has been a pleasure working with them and I shall certainly recommend Vernon Press to colleagues.

Finally, I am of course also indebted to many scholars who have gone before me. Rather than attempt to show that I claim this or that insight for myself, I prefer to admit that some may have come from previous readings, that others may have been “in the air,” or that even if someone had the same insight and published it before me, some of them were at the same time my own. My interest in Impressionism dates to the time when, as a youngster, my mother “dragged” me to the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. At Yale, I was an undergraduate student of Robert L. Herbert, whose lectures and, later, his classic book *Impressionism: Art, Leisure, and Parisian Society* (1988) certainly left their mark. On the other hand, I doubt that anyone could possibly be familiar with every single publication in the Manet, Baudelaire, or Shakespeare literature. I apologize in advance for neglecting to reference someone who deserves it. I should also say that this book builds on my previous studies, and so if the reader is familiar with them, they will no doubt find occasional views or passages familiar. When I believe I have something truly new to say, I try to point it out, as well as when I engage in a positive and exceptional dialogue with a particular writer. In most cases, however, I have refrained from taking up arguments for or against some theory, method, interpreter or other, preferring to reframe concepts in my own words, through which I hope to make them accessible.

—James H. Rubin, New York City and Alsace, France, 2025

# INTRODUCTION: RETHINKING MANET

*Well, acting is a trick. It's not becoming someone else; I don't change myself. ... I don't try to transmogrify into someone else.*

—Anthony Hopkins<sup>1</sup>

History is an interplay between agency and structure. Historians study the past as a way to understand and explain the present. Individuals count as much as culture and circumstances in history, and both are irreducible, requiring approaches from several angles at once. The painter Édouard Manet (1832–1883) was a central figure for momentous and lasting changes in the realm of art that still resound today. His art speaks directly to the philosophical issues and political conflicts of his own time and is therefore deeply embedded in the development of a modernity that extends to our time. He is part of history while being himself; that is, he engaged directly in the circumstances of his time and place and took charge of them by responding to his situation. *Manet's Ironic Duplicity* focuses on that situation and the historically conscious artist's sometimes ambivalent struggle for authenticity.

It may be said that one measure of an artist's greatness lies in the ability of their work to make people see not only what the artist had in mind but beyond it. The book, therefore, introduces a new and original way of considering Manet's work and career in the context of a society in transition. Rather than another full chronological monograph, the book is an interdisciplinary study organized around key concepts. It reframes the major, and sometimes disparate issues in Manet scholarship by focusing on a never-before-considered overriding theme—ironic duplicity—which itself is multiple in its manifestations and variants, hence *duplicities*. This new interpretation resituates Manet not simply as someone whose essential characteristic is to challenge authority but, rather, as one who faced constant challenges to his own integrity, identity, and creative authority, a chief aspect of which was his sense of entitlement, deserved or not, and, in the end, masculinity. The latter is a stereotype understood through its commonly cited attributes—dominance through strength, courage, independence, leadership, and assertiveness—all of which Manet exhibited and often emphasized, sometimes ironically, sometimes cynically. (If a woman possessed such characteristics, she probably at the time would likely have been

considered atypical and probably threatening.) Reversing the usual narrative, this study deconstructs and enlightens the myth of the heroic artist struggling for individual and original vision by revealing how so much of Manet's creativity and irony was prompted by frustrations due to repressive politics, censorship, and challenges to his sense of self. Again, a key aspect of the latter was his masculinity. This is the underside of so-called heroism, stressing the operative forces of the social and political status quo in shaping Manet's strategies and introspection, as he chose to assert himself against the main forces and changes of his times. To those who will continue to regard Manet's challenges to tradition as heroic, one might respond that in many respects, his resistance was forced upon him, despite his positive but often frustrated wish to be understood, accepted, and acclaimed. If it is true, as the title of Stéphane Guégan's formidable and timely monographic exhibition of 2011 claimed, that Manet was the "inventor of modernity," it is equally true that, as I would say, "modernity invented Manet."<sup>2</sup> Karl Marx noted that although "men make their own history, ... they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly found, given, and transmitted from the past."<sup>3</sup> There is hence another, more historically grounded side to the Manet story, one which tells us far more about his time and the conditions of "modernity," than we have yet heard for his case. Manet was indeed a man of his time, which means he was a man caught in the web of historical and cultural circumstances. These circumstances forced him to be the man we now call Manet.

In proposing that the issue of masculinity ran throughout Manet's career, I show how it underlay his strategic practices and themes. Chapter One introduces the painting of the great operatic baritone *Jean-Baptiste Faure as Hamlet* (Figure 1) and the questions it raises. Manet both represented and embodied the conditions of modernity, during which, not only politics (as I show in Chapter Two) but a rising tide of feminism challenged his masculine identity and agency. For Manet's older, and in many ways precedent-setting, contemporary, Gustave Courbet (1819–1877), masculinity had become an issue that rose pointedly to the surface of his art. Unlike Gustave Caillebotte, Manet's younger contemporary, Manet's masculinity was not expressed through a focus on male bonding, anatomy, or athleticism.<sup>4</sup> For Manet, by contrast, it is an underlying, at most points subconscious issue, manifest for the most part indirectly. For him, it involved a sense of entitlement, dominance, and honor, produced by the constraints and vocabulary of his times. Following chapters setting up philosophical and political contexts, I demonstrate Manet's self-consciously rebellious, yet subtly manifested will and challenges to traditional

aesthetic dogma. In Chapter Five, I show with new depth how a gifted and brilliant painter who happened to be a woman, Berthe Morisot, became both Manet's rival and his muse. Later chapters demonstrate Manet's means to achieve meaning or its ostensible opposite and his effort to regain leadership after the younger Impressionists appeared to take over the avant-garde. Chapter Nine returns to Hamlet and the theme of the modern "situation," with the idea of irony as a way of life. And then finally, in Chapter Ten, the book will show Manet desperately clinging to his masculine self-image as he became increasingly disabled. Issues of dominance and leadership, key gendered attributes associated at the time with masculinity as an active, creative force, were manifestations of his willful resistance to the coercive strictures of his time.

In today's world of identity politics in art, the book has ramifications for many artists, both past and avant-garde, and Manet's personal Hamlet-like situation seems especially relevant. That is why Manet's painting of *Faure as Hamlet* serves as the focal point for much of the first half of this book and then again increasingly towards its end. We shall find through Manet's meditation on the fate of Hamlet that his struggle was a voyage of self-discovery and self-recognition. Eventually accepting his contradictory dualities—privileged versus marginal, traditionalist versus radical innovator—he wore them as a badge of honor, his sense of which was old-fashioned yet very much alive. Honor, as Robert A. Nye points out, is an essential feature of masculinity and sets a standard of empowerment "that is extremely fragile, is open to constant challenge, and produces keen feelings of vulnerability." He implies there is a crisis of masculinity during the period encompassing Manet's career.<sup>5</sup> As Goethe is said to have stated: "From the powers that bind all beings/ The man sets himself free who overcomes himself."<sup>6</sup>

Duplicity means pretending to be someone or something you are not. It is a strong word, but not necessarily negative, as when related to the role of the actor in a performance, as a means to survival, or to maintain one's self-esteem, as in Manet's case, through masculine display. Feminism has taught us for many years that a major, and often primary factor in the performance of an individual's identity is gender. Manet's duplicity often took the form of irony, as in the masculine bravery of making light of threats and circumstances that would otherwise require them to be seriously addressed. The word irony derives from the Greek word (*Eironeia*) for dissemblance. It is a kind of double-speak, where one audience hears or sees the literal meaning or representation, while the initiated or those with similar attitudes hear or see the opposite. In his short essay on humor, Freud's concept of humor is quite close to that of irony:

There is no doubt that the essence of humor is that one spares oneself the affects to which the situation would naturally give rise and dismisses the possibility of such expressions of emotion with a jest. ... The grandeur in it clearly lies in the triumph of narcissism, the victorious assertion of the ego's invulnerability. The ego refuses to be distressed by the provocations of reality, to let itself be compelled to suffer. It insists that it cannot be affected by the traumas of the external world; it shows, in fact, that such traumas are no more than occasions for it to gain pleasure. This last feature is a quite essential element of humor.<sup>7</sup>

Surely there was a touch of narcissism in Manet's general strategy of irony and playful humor, which generally called attention to himself and his will to master all situations, including when he may have felt vulnerable.

Role playing can be another form of duplicity: Born to circumstances that made him an ultimate insider, Manet played the outsider until finally, as I show with *Masked Ball at the Opera* (Figure 67), he took responsibility for the contradictions of his position, which led to his exploration of the human condition in *Hamlet*. Recent Manet studies have focused on the women who are the majority of figures in Manet's paintings and frequently the objects of his masculine artistic authority. Here, female models such as Victorine Meurent and Berthe Morisot are, of course, central to my argument, but I focus even more on exploring Manet's little-studied pictures of Hamlet as the ultimate embodiment of nineteenth-century male angst.

The book aims to show that Manet's efforts to maintain his power, dominance and even leadership in the realm of art during a repressive regime are accompanied by a Hamlet-like dialogue within himself. Constraints to his freedom and independence through censorship and exclusion can be understood as threats to his masculine identity and, therefore, shaped his responses. Manet's oppositional politics were, as will be shown, a major factor in his need for ironic duplicity. Hamlet's tragic flaw is usually understood to be his indecisiveness when faced with conditions that are primarily beyond his control. Although Hamlet's character cannot be called effeminate, his weakness can be construed as a tragic lack of sufficient masculine will, the latter associated with action and determination. Manet's response to his situation was different, if not directly opposed. I propose that Manet used the theme of Hamlet, to whose predicaments he was deeply sympathetic, as a means to meditate on his own situation. Unlike Hamlet, and with his close friend, the poet-critic Charles Baudelaire (1821–1867) as an important mentor, Manet responded to adversity through irony. With his role-playing and refusal to



conform to conventions, Manet maintained a stubborn struggle for acceptance right up until his death. Irony turns the tables on the expected relationship of power; it rhetorically transforms the objects of power into subjects themselves, reversing the expected outcome. Through Manet's painting of *Faure as Hamlet*, one can both view the modern condition and measure Manet's responses to it.

### **“L’art c’est le faux”<sup>8</sup>**

A certain duplicity may be said to be at the heart of art, especially in figural painting, where the rank materials of paint—pigments suspended in linseed oil applied to canvas—masquerade as objects and figures from the world. This was the one sort of duplicity Manet aimed to expose by making his manually performed imitation (as opposed to academic and/or color-photograph-like illusionism) explicit. He forcefully displayed his control over the physical matter of painting through his open and sometimes sweepingly gestural brushwork. And yet despite flaunting his technique, it was successful and convincing just enough to create illusions of reality sufficient to make viewers respond both emotionally and physically. A further aspect of duplicity in naturalistic representations, or Realism, with which Manet was sometimes charged, is that a fabricated image can appear to take the place of reality itself, maintaining an illusion of neutral and objective truth. Even when representing inflammatory subject matter, such a painting seems to claim a documentary reality. In exposing things to view, such as social ills, those images have the power to affect our ways of thinking, and with them politics and history. In Manet's case, even his most anodyne pictures are often imbued with deep thought, irony, and a philosophy of life for the contemporary times they ostensibly depict.

As to the compositional aspects of his figure arrangements, Manet sometimes had their gazes imply a dialogue between artist and model that suggests the latter's response to his instructions, or otherwise disguising their thoughts. Other traits, such as bold and simplified color schemes and a dialogue between spatiality and flatness, may have been inspired partly by Japanese prints, but all these features had rarely appeared together in near life-sized European figure painting destined for viewing at public exhibitions. The result was a daring deconstruction of academic training and traditional painting as understood by most, and a style that became associated with modernity. His pictures always appeared willfully staged and crafted as well as disconcertingly present and real as objects.

The ironic self-consciousness underlying Manet's strategies, however, went considerably further than style or technique, for he recognized that the artist's role can be duplicitous in ways beyond the actual making of art. The experience of working under the authoritarian regimes of the Second Empire and early Third Republic, whose norms frustrated the painter's aspirations, clarified for Manet the necessity for his strategies. To pursue an authentic career—one he could believe in and maintain a sense of honor—he chose to play roles that made much of his work disruptive. While he most visibly challenged authority on aesthetic grounds, any such challenge was understood to be political, since the conservative government had a vested interest in a clear-cut hierarchy of genres of art and its traditionally executed and finished stylistic vehicle as promoted at the Paris Academy. Indeed, the head of the Academy—its official name was *L'École Nationale des Beaux-Arts*—Charles Blanc, was a friend of Manet's family; but despite living very near the institution, Manet refused to attend its classes. He preferred instruction and practice in the independent studio of a more stylistically and politically liberal painter named Thomas Couture, where Manet made several friends, as well as meeting his future model, Victorine Meurent.

Despite his privileged position as a comfortable white male scion of the upper bourgeoisie, Manet became a victim of exclusion and censorship not just because of his challenging artistic bravado featuring choppy brushwork and ostensible lack of finish, but also his political beliefs, which might be guessed through his early choices of ostensibly degrading Realist subject matter. This trend had seized public attention thanks to Manet's notorious predecessor, the militantly left-leaning so-called Realist painter Courbet, mentioned earlier. Unlike Courbet's unfazed, straightforward challenges to political authority, however, Manet attempted to navigate the repercussions of his commitments in multiple situations through compromises and duplicity. He also began to reflect deeply on the costs of those positions. This book shows how these reflections emerge, especially through his two pictures of *Hamlet*, of which this is the first in-depth study.<sup>9</sup> In order for their central position in his career to be understood, however, the *Hamlet* paintings must be seen in their various contexts—literary, theatrical, philosophical, political, and gendered—as well as in relation to other works by Manet himself.

The ideas of Baudelaire—who, in addition to his role as poet and critic, might also be called a philosopher—have always provided crucial insights for interpreting Manet and his work. While building on the many studies of both Manet and of Baudelaire that precede it, this book proposes a number of new

insights that result from interweaving art history, literary criticism, gender studies, theater, philosophy, politics, and biography. The notion of the artist as performer, and Manet's painting as performative, are themes in my previous writings, but this book is the first time I have considered paintings of actual performers. (And what could make more sense?!)<sup>10</sup> It places them in the light not only of Baudelaire's, but of Denis Diderot, Victor Hugo and others' theories concerning theater and their references to acting. It also, for the first time, considers them performances of masculinity.

A central theme is the widespread philosophical concept of the split self, noting that role-playing runs through both Manet's life and art, both his public persona and his private person. Its theories were current in Manet's time; its manifestations are present in both Manet's political and ostensibly apolitical work, genres that are usually considered separately. It abides in his public and private consciousness, the tenaciously masculinist character of which emerges in his relationship with Berthe Morisot and then becomes obvious during his illness with syphilis. The conditions under which he acted, although often dire in his time, were associated with modernity and still linger in the world today, as I suggest with occasional lines from contemporary commentators as chapter epigraphs. Such conditions especially affect those whose views differ from society at large or from its dominant forces. When irony is the response, it can be considered a psychological form of power—pretending to find humor in adversity creates the illusion of maintaining agency, ostensibly neutralizing threats by laughing them away.

PAGES MISSING  
FROM THIS FREE SAMPLE

# INDEX

## A

- abstention, 160
- Abstract Expressionism, 193
- abstraction, 193
- academic training, deconstruction
  - of, 5
- academicism, vs. color, 12–15
- Académie Royale des Beaux-Arts,
  - 11, 37, 277n1
- acceptance, struggle for, 5
- acting, 215, 270–71n10
  - Baudelaire on, 84–88
  - Diderot on, 84–88
  - as model for artistic activity,
    - 84–88
- actors
  - apparent spontaneity masking
    - calculation, 139
  - duality of, 94
  - as model for artistic activity,
    - 84–88
  - portraits of, 96–97, 135, 210 (*see also specific actors*)
  - as prototypes, 82, 83–102
  - representation of, 205
- actresses, 205, 224, 303n5
- agency, 7, 105, 108, 111
  - ambiguous, 103–34
  - artistic, 143
  - limits to, 110–11
  - of models, 129
- Aldouri, Hamman, 299n37
- Alexandre, Arsène, 299–300n2
- alienation, 165, 166, 175, 183
- Alsace, province of, 150
- Alsdorf, Bridget, 306n9
- alter-egos, 211, 212
- Ambre, Émilie, 303n6
- Anderson, Sam, 205
- Andrée, Ellen, 200, 201, 302n17
- anomie*, 166, 193
- Anonymous, *Jean-Baptiste Faure*,
  - 10
- appearance, vs. reality, 101
- Arendt, Hannah, 303n4
- Argenteuil, France, 180, 181
- Armstrong, Carol, 129–30, 270–71n10, 279n13, 291n45
- art, 83
  - palliative effect of, 165
  - social function of, 163–65
  - truth and, 76, 163–64
  - as visual form of poetry, 164
- art market, democratization of,
  - 277n1
- artifice, 18, 185
- artists
  - agency and, 109–12
  - as *moqueurs*, 78–79
  - as performers, 7, 51–65
  - temperament of, 77–78, 165–66, 169, 171
- Asselineau, Charles, *Double Vie*,
  - 27, 28
- Astruc, Zacharie, 179, 180
- Aupick, Jacques, 287n11
- Auteil, France, 217
- authenticity, 83, 161, 214
- authoritarian regimes, 22–23
- authority, 103, 104–5
- avant-garde, 188

criticism of, 164  
 origins of the term, 163  
 theories of, 295n1

## B

- Balzac, Honoré de, 22, 205, 210, 302n2
- Banville, Théodore de, 197, 211
- Barbizon School, 271n3
- Bastille Day, 160, 161
- Bataille, Georges, 275n11
- Baudelaire, Charles, 4–7, 25, 62, 79, 103, 128, 130, 148, 161, 166, 170–71, 214–15, 286n7, 286n8, 288n22
- on acting, 84–88, 215
- aesthetic practices of, 136
- on artist as flâneur, 39
- Balzac and, 302n2
- on color, 129
- comédie absolue* and, 206
- on the comic, 196
- comparison between artists and prostitutes, 111
- concept of art as "tonic," 296n4
- concept of the other, 114
- Courbet and, 164, 288n21
- creativity and, 164–65
- critique of Manet's *Olympia*, 109–10, 165
- dandyism and, 293n21
- De Quincey and, 274n6
- death of, 138
- Delacroix and, 13–14, 21
- duality and, 94–95, 102
- on the eyes, 172–73, 175
- family of, 287n11
- flâneur and, 283–84n23
- friendship with Manet, 21–22
- funeral of, 138–39
- on genius, 197
- Hamlet and, 210
- homo duplex* and, 26–29
- Hugo and, 284n25
- imagination and, 164, 165, 186, 196
- Impressionism and, 300–301n5
- on Manet's attentiveness to faces, 166
- Manet's ostracization and, 111–12
- on Manet's portraiture, 96–97
- maquillage* and, 105–6
- modernism and, 269n4
- modernity and, 139, 183
- performance and, 140
- photography and, 164, 293n17
- on poetic criticism, 194
- poetry of, 194–95
- pre-verbal and non-verbal communication and, 167
- prostitutes and, 105–6, 108
- Realism (school) and, 164, 287–88n18, 288n21
- realism and, 186, 196
- resistance from, 135
- Revolution of 1848 and, 39
- Rouvière and, 88, 91, 93–94, 95
- social function of art and, 165
- spleen and, 166, 302n2
- Stendhal and, 209, 283n14, 298n19
- synesthesia and, 296–97n11
- theory of the double self, 28–29
- transcendence and, 134
- Baudelaire, Charles, works of
- "To the Bourgeois," 164–65
- "Correspondances," 167, 168, 175

- De l'essence du rire et généralement du comique dans les arts plastiques* [*Of the Essence of Laughter and in General on the Comic in the Visual Arts*], 22, 28–29, 83, 84–85, 94, 135, 212, 283n18
- The Double Room* [*La Chambre double*], 26, 27
- "Enivrez vous," 194
- "The Eyes of the Poor," 174
- Fusées*, 105
- Invitation au voyage*, 25, 194–95
- "Le Chiffonnier, [The Ragpicker]," 137
- Le Peintre de la vie moderne* [*The Painter of Modern Life*], 21–22, 26, 38–39, 84, 86, 94–95, 105, 110, 144, 165, 167, 173, 205, 300–301n5
- Les Fleurs du mal* [*The Flowers of Evil*], 25, 110, 138, 173, 174, 183
- Les Français peints par eux-mêmes* [*The French painted by themselves*], 56
- "The Love of Falsehood," 172, 173
- Petits poèmes en prose* (*Paris Spleen*), 27, 174
- Salon of 1846*, 21–22, 84, 164–65, 171
- Salon of 1859*, 84
- Une Charogne*, 138
- Baudelaire, François, 287n11
- Bazille, Frédéric, 180
- Bazire, Edmond, 152, 271–72n8
- beauty, 196
- Beeny, Emily, 289n29
- beggar-philosophers, 135, 148
- Béni-Barde, Joseph, 217
- Benjamin, Walter, 269n4
- Berlin, Isaiah, 211, 275n11
- Berman, Marshall, 215–16, 269n4
- Bernhardt, Sarah, 303n5
- Bernstein, Leonard, 194
- Bizet, Georges, *Carmen*, 106, 303n6
- Blanc, Charles, 6, 13
- La Grammaire des arts du dessin* [*Grammar of the Arts of Drawing*], 13
- Blanche, Jacques-Émile, 218
- bodily presence, 140–41
- Boldini, Giuseppe, 272n9
- Bonaparte, Louis-Napoléon, 30, 160. *See also* Napoléon III
- Bonheur, Rosa, 104
- Bonnard, Émile Henri, 128
- boredom, 166
- Boulogne-sur-Mer, France, 184–85
- Bourbon monarchy, restoration of, 30, 160
- bourgeois materialism, 164–65
- the bourgeoisie, 148, 150, 193
- Britain, 43, 48
- Brunner, Irma, 224, 226
- brushwork, 11, 140–41, 152, 190, 198
- Buffon, *Natural History*, 27

## C

- Cachin, Françoise, 203, 243, 299–300n2, 300–301n5
- Cadart, Alfred, 47, 276n20
- Café de Bade, 21, 246

- Café de Londres, 246  
 Café Guerbois, 246, 300n3  
 café society, 246  
 Café Tortoni, 21, 202, 246  
 Caillebotte, Gustave, 293n19  
 Caillebotte, Gustave, 2, 270n4  
 Calabresi, L., *Jean-Baptiste Faure as Mephistopheles in Faust*, 17  
 Canada, 48  
 canvas, mirror and, 141  
 caricature, 11, 239  
 Carlota (Charlotte, daughter of King of Belgium), 47  
 Cartesianism, 13  
 Cassatt, Mary, 144  
 Castagnary, Jules-Antoine, 170  
 censorship, 2, 4, 6, 25–50, 156, 157, 209, 211  
 Césaire, Aimé, 83, 281–82n1  
 Cezanne, Paul, 128, 198, 298n17  
 Chabrier, Emmanuel, 152  
 Cham (Charles-Amédée de Noé), impression in *Le Charivari*, 13, 18  
 Champfleury (Jules François Felix Fleury-Husson), 39, 214, 308n28  
*The Actor Trianon* [*Le Comédien Trianon*], 93–94  
 duality and, 102  
 character, 15  
 Chardin, Jean-Baptiste-Siméon, 218, 291n4  
 Charpentier, Georges, 228, 240  
 Christ, images of, 145–47  
 civil war, 150, 157  
 Claretie, Jules, 181, 300–301n5  
 Clark, T.J., 22, 250, 287n13, 309n7  
 class, 197, 200, 309n7  
 Claus, Fanny, 184  
 Clemenceau, Georges, 32, 32  
 color, 21  
     vs. academicism, 12–15  
     Baudelaire, Charles on, 129  
     bodily presence and, 140–41  
     vs. drawing, 12–13  
     as female element, 13  
     line and, 129  
 colorism, 129, 133  
*comédie absolue*, 84–85  
 the "comic," 84  
 coming out, 159–62  
 Commedia dell'Arte, 53  
 Communards, 275n11. *See also*  
     Commune de Paris [Paris Commune]  
 Commune de Paris [Paris Commune], 150, 151, 161, 162  
 communication, lack of, 193–94  
 the Confederacy, 47  
 content, absence of narrative and, 193  
 costumes, 78  
 Council of Ministers, 30  
 Courbet, Gustave, 2, 6, 36–37, 78, 82, 88, 104, 110, 148, 150, 157, 163–64, 181, 209, 277n1, 277n2, 286n3, 286n5, 289n26  
*The Artist's Studio*, 36, 36  
 Baudelaire and, 288n21  
 concept of male action, 105  
 loose style and, 13–14  
 political militancy of, 111–12  
 Realism and, 103, 111, 165, 288n21  
 "Realism" exhibition of 1855, 111  
 Realist Manifesto, 103  
 refuses public honors, 233



self-exile of, 209, 289n26,  
296n28  
self-portraiture and, 140  
sexual freedom and, 104  
Courbin, Alain, 104  
courtesans 106, 108, 152. *See also*  
the prostitute/prostitutes  
Couture, Thomas, 6, 31, 37, 112  
Covent Garden, 18  
creativity, 3, 197  
Crimea, 276n21  
Crimean War, 43, 47, 276n21  
crisis of masculinity, 3  
cross-dressing, 197  
cultural authority, 182

## D

the dandy, 86–88, 95, 144, 293n21  
Daumier, Honoré, 56, 293–94n22  
*Baissez le rideau, la farce est  
jouée*, 156, 156  
De Banville, Théodore, 156  
De Callias, Nina, 290n37  
De Chennevières, Philippe,  
288n22  
De Man, Paul, 212, 214, 215,  
305n25  
De Quincey, Thomas, 274n6,  
275n13  
De Svazzema, Mathilde, 286n3  
decrepitude, 287–88n18, 288n19  
Degas, Edgar, 112, 115–16, 128,  
129, 181–83, 200, 226, 251,  
277n2  
*The Bellelli Family*, 301n8  
*L'Absinthe*, or *At the Café*, 190,  
191, 200  
*Place de la Concorde*, 301n8

*Portrait d'Eugène Manet*,  
279n14  
*Portraits at the Stock Exchange*,  
301n8  
Dejouy, Jules, 276n15  
Delacroix, Eugène, 13–14, 37, 62,  
72, 84, 90–92, 95, 128, 164–65,  
167–68, 273n14, 303n5  
*Hamlet and Horatio at the  
Graveyard*, 90, 90, 92, 96,  
99, 100–101  
*Liberty on the Barricades*, 154,  
293–94n22  
loose brushwork of, 138  
Delacroix and, 21  
Demarsy, Jeanne, 224, 225  
democracy, 166  
*dessin*, 12  
Devisme, Louis-François, 202  
dialectic, 11  
Diderot, Denis, 7, 22, 214, 271n1,  
283n18  
on acting, 85–86  
duality and, 102  
*Paradox on the Actor* [*Paradox  
sur le comédien*], 85–86,  
210–11  
*Rameau's Nephew*, 211  
discipline, 128  
disconnectedness, 166, 185  
Disdéri, Adolphe-Eugène, 279n13  
dissimulation, 83, 217–40  
diversion. *See* entertainment  
Dolan, Therese, 56  
Dombrowski, André, 270n4  
dominance, 2, 3, 4  
Dorival, Bernard, 295n32  
double consciousness, 130  
double meanings, 23

double nature of actor and  
character, 208

double self, 83, 101, 102, 103, 122

drawing, vs. color, 12–13. *See also*  
line

dual self, 25–50, 103, 172–73

duality, 102, 205, 208, 214  
of actors, 94  
Baudelaire and, 94–95  
duplicity and, 25–29  
laughter and, 95  
masculine/feminine, 12–13  
modernity and, 27–28  
of self, 172–73

Ducis, Jean-François, 303–4n9

Ducreux, Joseph, *Self-Portrait as a*  
*Moqueur*, 78–79, 79, 80

Dumas, Alexandre, 88, 303–4n9  
*La Dame aux Camélias*, 106

Dupin de Beyssat, Claire, 296n26

duplicity, 3, 83, 101, 103, 133, 150,  
157, 159–60, 205, 208, 211–12,  
214, 241  
benign, 25  
duality and, 25–29  
at heart of art, 5–7  
ironic, 1, 172  
necessity of, 23  
philosophy of, 140

Durand-Ruel, Paul, 271n3

Duranty, Edmond, 61, 217, 233,  
277n2, 306n4, 307n18

Duret, Théodore, 198

Durkheim, Émile, 27–28, 29, 87,  
161, 165, 166, 211, 296n6

Duval, Jeanne, 106, 108, 286n8,  
287n11

Dylan, Bob, 133

## E

École des Beaux-Art, 92, 304n11

*ego*, 29

engagement, 80–81

English literature, 209

*ennui*, 166, 172, 183

entertainment, 196, 197. *See also*  
spectacle; theater

entitlement, 2

Ephrussi, Charles, 219

Epictetus, 83, 282n2

eroticism, 239, 292n11

escapism, 195

Eugénie de Montijo, Empress, 45–  
46

exclusion, 4, 6

Exposition Universelle, 37, 111,  
160

eyes, 172–73, 185. *See also* facial  
expressions; gaze  
blank gazes, 163–77  
compared to mirrors, 173  
vacant, 173, 175–76

## F

facial expressions, 11, 101  
ambiguous, 200  
blank gazes, 165, 166–71  
domination of, 100–101  
illegible, 88  
melodramatic, 11  
reading, 167

Fantin-Latour, Henri, 115, 128,  
129, 299–300n2, 300n3  
*Portrait of Édouard Manet*, 81,  
82  
*A Studio in Batignolles*, 132,  
179–80, 179

Faure, Jean-Baptiste, 5, 88, 132,  
 195, 203, 271n3, 272n9, 272n10,  
 285n33, 303n5  
 as Hamlet, 2–5, 9, 10–11, 10, 17,  
 18–20, 23, 80, 83, 88, 95–  
 102, 98, 100, 132, 195, 203,  
 211–16, 217, 271–72n8,  
 272n9, 272n10, 285n33  
 study for, 100  
 self-portraiture and, 95–102  
 in Thomas's *Hamlet*, 18–20  
 female gaze, 66, 75–76, 80, 112,  
 122, 143  
 female submissiveness, 104  
 femininity  
 Impressionists and, 223–24  
 tokens of, 122  
 feminism, 2, 3, 104  
 Fête de la République, 160  
 fiction,  
 role-playing and, 83  
 truth and, 76  
 figure painting, 182, 183  
 atop hierarchy of genres, 182–  
 83  
 compared to still-lives, 101, 168  
 early avatars, 53–65  
 figure arrangements, 5  
 meaning and, 175–76  
 meaningless figures, 163–77  
 narrative, 80, 193  
 traditionalist technique in, 12  
 Fiocre, Eugénie, 72, 279n13  
 First Republic, 30  
 the *flâneur*, 87–88, 148, 283–84n23  
 Flaubert, Gustave, 22  
 flowers, paintings of, 223–24. *See*  
*also* still-lives  
 Fontainebleau Forest, 163  
 forms, feeling and, 168

Fournier, Eugénie-Désirée,  
 281n23, 289n24, 303n6  
 France, U.S. Civil War and, 47  
 Franco-Prussian War, 30, 105, 150,  
 157, 160  
 freedom, 212, 214, 215  
 French Revolution, 30, 277n1  
 French Romanticism, 95  
 Freud, Sigmund, 3, 196–97  
 Freudianism, 29  
 Fried, Michael, 270–71n10, 277–  
 78n3

## G

Galerie Martinet, 37, 38–39, 72,  
 295n32  
 Gambetta, Léon, 23, 30, 31, 233  
 Gandolfini, James, 101  
 Garibaldi, Giuseppe, 112  
 Gauguin, Paul, 147, 175, 293n18  
 Gauthier-Lathuille, Louis, 201, 201  
 Gautier, Théophile, 62  
 gaze(s), 66, 75–76, 80, 128, 166–71,  
 195  
 blank, 165, 166–71  
 confrontational, 193  
 female, 66, 75–76, 80, 112, 122,  
 143  
 vague, 190  
 windows and, 173–74  
*Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, 169–70  
 gender, 103–35, 188, 197  
 gendered performance, 103–34  
 Gennevilliers, France, 180, 190  
 genre painting, 277n1  
 Georgopulos, Nicole, 160, 292n10,  
 292n13  
 Germany, 150–51, 160. *See also*  
 Franco-Prussian War

Goethe, 3  
 Goncourt, Edmond, 144, 294n23  
 Goncourt, Jules de, 144, 294n23  
 Goncourt Brothers, *Manette Salomon*, 129–30  
 Gonzalès, Eva, 223, 243, 290n35  
 Goya, Francesco de, 43, 45, 62, 138  
     *The Executions of May 3, 1808*, 50  
     *Los Caprichos*, 158–59, 294–95n30  
     *Majas on a Balcony*, 193  
     *Nadie se conoce* [*Nobody Knows Himself*], 158–59, 158, 211  
     *Portrait of the Duchess of Alba*, 92–93, 93  
     *La Tauromaquia*, 296n28  
 Gros, Antoine-Jean, 44  
     *Napoléon on the Battlefield at Eylau*, 44, 44  
 the *grotesque*, 84–85, 215  
 Guégan, Stéphane, 2, 271n7, 306n3  
 Guerbois, François-Auguste, 300n3  
 Guernsey, Island of, 209, 210  
 Guiffrey, Jean, 255  
 Guillaumin, Armand, 139  
 Guillemet, Jean-Baptiste Antoine, 184, 185  
 Guillemet, Jules, 187, 188, 197–98, 228, 230  
 Guillemet, Madame Jules, 187, 230, 231, 234, 255  
 Guizot, François, 209, 304n11  
 Guys, Constantin, 87–88, 173, 283–84n23

## H

Hamlet, 3, 208, 285n33  
     actors playing, 212–13, 214, 215  
     images of, 83, 88, 89, 90, 92, 95–101, 97, 135, 195–96, 203  
     (see also *specific paintings*)  
     irony and, 205–16  
     Manet's preoccupation with, 20–21  
     modern man and, 205–11  
     as play within a play, 209  
     political meaning of, 206  
     theme of, 4–5, 6, 51, 92, 205–16, 270n9  
 haptic opticality, 13, 76  
 harmony, 21, 170, 171, 196  
 Hauser, Henriette, 144, 190, 196  
 Haussmann, Baron, 36  
 Hecht, Albert, 152  
 Hegel, G.W.F., 84, 282n12, 305n25  
 Hemingway, Ernest, 105  
 heroic artist, myth of, 2  
 history, 26  
 history paintings, 277n1  
 Hobbes, Thomas, 283n14  
 Hogarth, William, *Portrait of David Garrick Playing Richard III*, 97, 97  
*homo duplex*, 26–29, 205  
 honor, 2, 150, 176, 233  
 Horace, 80, 277n1  
 Hugo, François-Victor, 210, 284n25  
 Hugo, Victor, 7, 88, 284n25, 303–4n9  
     *Cromwell*, 84  
     Hamlet and, 210  
     *Le Roi s'amuse*, 206  
     Romantic Manifesto, 84

self-exile of, 209, 210  
 human condition, irony and, 211–16  
 humor, 3–4, 7, 79, 239  
   Freud on, 196–97  
   Manet's sense of, 196–203  
   realism and, 285n33  
 hypocrisy, 150, 159, 211

## I

*id*, 29  
 the ideal, 297n15  
 identity, 26, 61, 74–75  
 illusionism, 18, 167  
 imagination, 164, 165, 193, 194,  
   287–88n18  
   painting as window for, 171–77  
   vs. realism, 179–203  
   reality and, 165–66  
   transcendence and, 175  
 imitation, explicit performance of,  
   5  
 Impressionism, 164, 179, 180–82,  
   300–301n5  
   *anomie* and, 193  
   history of, 181  
   origin of the name, 301n7  
 Impressionists, 13, 139, 157, 179–  
   82, 180, 243, 275n11, 277n2,  
   296n26, 300n3  
   exhibition in 1974, 180  
   femininity and, 223–24  
   as "intransigents," 275n11,  
     299–300n2, 300–301n5  
   Manet and, 115–16, 183  
   women, 144–45  
 incommunicability, 174–75  
 indifference, 193  
 Ingres, J. A. D., 13, 163

inscrutability, 175, 186  
 intangibility, 175  
 interiority, 171, 186  
 interpellation, 76, 173, 176, 279–  
   80n15, 299n37  
 interpretation, 144, 159, 163, 166,  
   173, 175–77, 188, 250–52  
 introspection, 135, 140, 159–62  
 ironic duplicity, theme of, 1  
 irony, 1, 3–4, 34–35, 77–82, 95, 138,  
   188, 196, 203, 269n4  
   Hamlet and, 205–16  
   human condition and, 211–16  
   as response to adversity, 4–5  
   as way of life, 211–16  
 Irregularism, 181  
 isolation, 305n1

## J

Japanese prints, 5, 44, 47  
 Jeannot, Pierre-Georges, 218  
 Juárez, Benito, 48, 49  
 Judt, Tony, 275n11  
 July Monarchy, 30, 61

## K

Katz, Jonathan D., 270n4  
 Kean, Edmund, 84  
 "keep-the-viewer-guessing"  
   category of painting, 197–98  
 Kessler, Marni R., 24, 32, 115, 289–  
   90n31  
 Koëlla, Léon, 58, 61, 74, 278n6  
 Kovács, Steven, 278n6  
 Kremnitzer, Kathryn, 145, 293n15

## L

La Comédie Française, 84, 92

Lafayette, Marquis de, 163  
 Lagrène, Jean, 56  
 Lajer-Burcharth, Eva, 65  
 landscape painting, 277n1,  
     296n26  
 Latouche, Gaston, 251  
 laughter, 84–85, 95, 209  
 laundresses, 200  
 Laurent, Méry, 220, 224, 233, 234,  
     307n19  
 Le Brun, Charles, 11  
     *Expressive Head: La Douleur*,  
     11  
*Le Figaro*, 21–22  
 Le Musée Espagnol, 61–62  
*Le Temps*, 157  
 leadership, 3, 4, 179–203  
 L'École Nationale des Beaux-Arts,  
     6  
 Leenhoff, Ferdinand, 279n14  
 Leenhoff, Léon, 278n6, 305n30  
 Leenhoff, Rodolphe, 189, 190, 198  
 Leenhoff, Suzanne (wife of  
     Édouard Manet), *See* Manet,  
     Suzanne  
 Left Bank, 150  
 left-wing barricades, 139  
 Lejosne, Madame Hippolyte, 39  
 Lemaître, Frédérick, 84  
 Lemonnier, Isabelle, 228, 234–40,  
     235, 238, 252, 255–64, 308n27,  
     308n28  
 Leoncavallo, Ruggiero, 206  
     *Pagliacci* [*Clowns*], 206  
 Leroy, Louis, 301n7  
*Les Intransigeants*, 275n11, 299–  
     300n2, 300–301n5  
*L'Événement*, 234  
 line  
     color and, 129

    as male element, 13  
 Locke, Nancy, 58  
 Longfellow, Henry Wadsworth,  
     274n6  
 looking, vs. reading, 168–69  
 loose style, 13–14  
 Louis XIV, King, 30, 150  
 Louis XVI, King, 160  
 Louisiana Purchase, 48  
 Louis-Napoléon, 209. *See also*  
     Napoléon III  
 Louis-Philippe d'Orléans, King,  
     30, 61, 156, 293–94n22  
 Lucchini, Fabrice, 241  
 Luquet, Jules, 47  
 Lycée Condorcet, 208, 301n6

## M

MacMahon, Marshall Patrice, 22–  
     23, 30, 34, 150–51, 154, 156–60,  
     158, 211, 217, 295n32, 296n26,  
     296n27  
 Macready, William Charles, 84  
 Madeleine, Laurence, 286n3  
 male action, Courbet's concept of,  
     105  
 male artists, as prostitute, 111  
 male-female relations, 193  
 Mallarmé, Stéphane, 175, 208,  
     209, 288n19, 301n6, 304n12  
     "Manet and the  
     Impressionists," 181  
 Manet, Auguste, 30, 103, 218,  
     278n6, 281n23, 305n30  
 Manet, Édouard, 30, 77, 146–47,  
     303n6. *See also* Manet,  
     Édouard, works of  
     access to the other forbidden  
     in, 166–67

- anti-academicism of, 129
- anti-Bonapartist views of, 23, 29–30
- as artist-performers, 65
- association with opposition figures, 31–32
- becomes a pariah, 110–11
- "colorist" style of, 12–15
- creativity of, 2, 3
- criticism of, 135
- death of, 218
- dialogue between past and present and, 139–40
- dissimulation by, 234–35
- divided self and, 82
- double consciousness of, 130
- dual self and, 103
- as entertainer, 80
- exemplifies the myth of the modern, 82
- family of, 150, 184–85, 281n23  
(*see also specific family members*)
- feigned spontaneity of, 18
- feminine side of, 129–30
- finances at the end of his life, 218–19
- gazes and, 166–71
- humor and, 239
- illness of, 20, 23, 217–18, 220, 224, 228, 233–34, 236, 241, 251, 305n30, 306n9
- Impressionists and, 180–82, 183, 299–300n2, 300n3 (*see also specific artists*)
- independence of, 129
- introspection and, 135
- as "inventor of modernity," 2
- isolation of, 241, 245–46
- joins family in Oléron, 150
- leadership of, 179–203
- leg amputated from gangrene, 218
- Legion of Honor and, 217, 233
- looking vs. reading and, 168–69
- meaning and, 14–15, 21, 163–77, 184
- military service of, 103–4, 105, 295n32
- as model, 129
- modernity and, 139
- necessity of duplicity and, 23
- philosophical reflections of, 135–40
- politics and, 22–23, 111–12, 163–77
- portraits of, 81, 82, 128, 179–80, 179
- portrayed by Fantin-Latour, 179–80, 179
- post-MacMahon phase of his career, 219–20
- as prankster, 77–79
- preoccupation with Hamlet, 20–21
- provocation through Realism, 165
- Realism and, 165–66
- rebelliousness of, 2–3
- retouches Morisot's painting, 115
- revisions by, 139
- as revolutionary, 80
- self-consciousness and, 22–23
- self-image of, 3
- self-portraiture and, 40, 131, 132–33, 140–41, 147, 149
- sense of humor of, 196–203
- social life of, 218
- syphilis symptoms and, 217–18

- transition to newer model of painting, 39
- Manet, Édouard, works of
- The Absinthe Drinker*, 37, 55, 56, 65, 72, 88, 135, 137, 138, 167, 206, 273n14
  - Argenteuil*, 181, 190, 192, 198, 289n28, 300–301n5
  - At the Café Guerbois*, 300n3
  - Au Café*, 246, 250, 302n17
    - reconstruction of, 249
  - Autumn, Portrait of Méry Laurent*, 224
  - The Balcony*, 96, 114, 115, 122, 169–70, 184–85, 186, 193, 194
  - The Balloon*, 41–43, 41, 44, 45, 53, 61, 159, 161, 162, 276n20, 309n7
  - A Bar at the Folies-Bergère*, 218, 233, 246, 247, 250–52
  - The Battle between the U.S.S. Kearsarge and the C.S.S. Alabama*, 46, 47, 151
  - Before the Mirror*, 142, 143, 144–45
  - A Beggar in a Duffle Coat*, 291n2
  - A Beggar with Oysters*, 135, 136, 136, 138, 183, 306n4
  - The Bench in the Garden*, 241, 242, 243, 245–46
  - Berthe Morisot in a Mourning Hat*, 124, 127
  - Berthe Morisot with a Fan*, 119, 122, 123, 125
  - Boating*, 189, 190, 193, 194, 195, 197, 198
  - Bouquet of Violets with a Fan*, 122, 122, 220
  - Boy with Sword*, 58, 59, 61, 74
  - Bullfight*, 45, 73–74
  - Bundle of Asparagus*, 219, 219
  - Caricature view of the Salon des Refusés*, 70
  - censored print of MacMahon-Polichinelle, 154, 155, 161, 197, 211
  - Chez Le Père Lathuille*, 201–2, 201
  - Christ Mocked by Soldiers*, 288n19
  - Civil War*, 151, 151, 156, 293–94n22
  - Claude Monet Painting with his Wife in the Boat Studio*, 180, 180, 300–301n5
  - Coin de Café-Concert* (reconstruction of), 249
  - A Concert in the Tuileries Garden*, 38–41, 40, 62, 87–88, 131, 148, 152, 154, 159–60, 184, 196, 218, 278n6
  - In the Conservatory*, 187, 188, 190, 193, 197–98
  - The Dead Christ with Angels*, 137, 145, 146
  - The Dead Toreador*, 137, 277n22
  - Déjeuner sur l'herbe* [*Luncheon on the Grass* or *Picnic*]
    - originally *Le Bain*, 20, 67, 72, 74–78, 80, 82, 165–67, 176, 184, 190, 197, 288n19
    - considered a prank or joke, 77–78, 197
    - eyes in, 173
    - provocation of, 193–94
    - triptych, 66–76, 66, 78, 110, 139



- The Double Room* [*La Chambre double*], 138
- The Escape of Rochefort*, 34
- The Execution of Emperor Maximilian*, 39, 47–50, 49, 159, 296n28, 309n7  
lithograph, 50
- The Fifer Boy*, 58, 60, 61, 76, 110–11, 166, 197
- figure painting, 53–65 (*see also* figure painting; *specific paintings*)
- Flowers in a Crystal Vase*, 222
- The Funeral of Baudelaire*, 138
- The Guitarrero*, *See The Spanish Singer*
- The House in Rueil*, 243, 244, 245, 245
- Incident in a Bullfight*, 44–45, 45, 47, 159, 296n28
- Isabelle* [?] *at the Beach*, 238, 239
- Jean-Baptiste Faure as Hamlet*, 2–5, 9, 10, 18, 20, 23, 80, 83, 88, 95–102, 132, 195, 203, 205, 206, 207, 212–16, 217, 271–72n8, 272n9, 272n10, 285n33  
oil painting for, 98  
study for, 100
- La Parisienne*, 302n17
- last works, 217–40
- Letter to Madame Jules Guillemet, 231, 231
- Letter to Mademoiselle Marguerite, 231, 232
- Lola de Valence*, 62, 63, 76, 166, 183, 197, 278n9
- Luncheon in the Studio*, 169, 169, 184
- Madame Manet in the Conservatory*, 227, 228
- Madame Manet with a Cat*, 228, 229
- A Masked Ball at the Opera*, 4, 131, 149, 150–52, 156–59, 161–62, 184, 205, 211, 215, 300n3, 309n7
- Mlle. V. in the Costume of an Espada*, 68, 72, 74, 97, 197
- Nana*, 141, 143, 144, 176
- oeuvre as series of performances, 51–52
- The Old Musician*, 35, 36–39, 53, 56, 61, 65, 80, 88, 145, 159, 183, 277–78n3
- Olympia*, 20, 75, 95, 105–12, 107, 139, 144, 152, 165–67, 176, 190, 279–80n15, 287n13, 288n19, 288n22, 290n37, 308n28, 309n7
- Baudelaire's critique of, 109–10, 165
- controversy, 109–10
- eyes in, 173
- Zola's defense of, 192
- "painterly" style of, 12
- paintings of Monet, 180–81
- paintings of Morisot, 114, 116, 117, 119, 121, 122–25, 123, 125, 127, 176, 184, 185, 196, 208
- in pastel, 226, 234
- "*Philippine*," 239–40, 239
- "Philosophers" paintings, 135–40
- Pinks and Clematis in a Crystal Vase*, 221
- plein-air, 183–90
- Plum Brandy*, 199–200, 199

- Polichinelle*, 154, 155, 161, 197  
 portfolio of etchings, 52, 52,  
 159  
*Portrait of Antonin Proust*, 31,  
 33  
*Portrait of Berthe Morisot with  
 a Bouquet of Violets*, 125,  
 208  
*Portrait of Berthe Morisot with  
 a Muff*, 119, 121  
*Portrait of Emilie Ambre*, 303n6  
*Portrait of Eva Gonzalès*, 116,  
 118, 223  
*Portrait of Georges Clemenceau  
 at the Tribune*, 32, 32  
*Portrait of Henri Rochefort*, 33–  
 34, 33  
*Portrait of His Parents*  
 [Monsieur et Madame  
 Manet], 37, 38, 103  
*Portrait of Irma Brunner: La  
 Viennoise*, 226  
*Portrait of Isabelle Lemonnier*,  
 234–35, 235  
*Portrait of Isabelle Lemonnier  
 with Muff*, 236  
*Portrait of Jeanne Demarsy:*  
*Spring*, 224, 225  
*Portrait of Laure*, 286–87n9  
*Portrait of M. Pertuiset, the Lion  
 Hunter*, 202–3, 203  
*Portrait of Madame Jules  
 Guillemet*, 230  
*Portrait of Victorine Meurent*,  
 72, 73  
*Portrait of Zacharie Astruce*,  
 179, 180  
*The Ragpicker*, 135, 137, 137,  
 138  
*The Railway: La Gare Saint-  
 Lazare*, 139, 185, 186  
*Resting: Berthe Morisot in her  
 Studio*, 116, 117, 122  
*Roses in a Champagne Glass*,  
 223  
*Rue Mosnier with Flags*, 161,  
 161  
*Self-Portrait, Standing*, 147,  
 147, 148  
*Self-Portrait with Palette*, 131,  
 132, 141  
*Sketch for A Bar at the Folies-  
 Bergère*, 248, 250  
*The Spanish Singer*, 37, 56, 57,  
 62, 65, 72, 88, 145, 183, 206  
*Spring, Portrait of Jean  
 Demarsy*, 224  
*Still-life with Lemon*, 220  
 still-lives, 170, 198, 218, 219–20,  
 223–24, 277n1, 290n35,  
 290n37, 306n9, 306n11 (see  
 also specific paintings)  
*The Street Singer*, 62, 64, 76,  
 166, 196  
*Swallows*, 289n28  
*The Theater of Polichinelle*, 52–  
 53, 52  
*The Tragic Actor: Philibert  
 Rouvière as Hamlet*, 88, 89,  
 91–92, 95, 111, 197, 206,  
 212–13, 214, 215  
 watercolors, 228, 243  
*Woman with a Fan, Jeanne  
 Duval*, 108  
*Young Lady with a Parrot*, 152,  
 153  
*Young Man in the Costume of a  
 Majo*, 69, 74  
 Manet, Eugène, 115, 190, 279n14

- Manet, Gustave, 29, 30, 32, 74, 217
- Manet, Suzanne (née Leenhoff),  
58, 227, 228, 229, 278n6,  
305n30
- Mantz, Paul, 169–70, 171, 185
- maquillage*, 95, 105–6, 143, 144,  
173
- Marguerite, 231
- Marie-Antoinette, Queen, 30
- Marquest, Louise, 279n13
- Martinet, Louis, 37, 38–39
- Marx, Karl, 2
- masculine/feminine duality,  
discourse on painting and, 12–  
13
- masculinism, 23
- masculinity, 2, 4, 7, 23, 78, 103,  
128, 160
- authority and, 104–5
- Courbet's concept of male  
action, 104
- as defining aspect of Manet's  
work, 217–40
- dissimulation and, 217–40
- honor and, 150, 176
- idea of, 103–4
- male freedom, 104
- masculine dissimulations, 217–  
40
- masculine honor, 233
- masculine performance, 111
- modernity and, 183–84
- Morisot and, 112–29
- performances of, 7
- as pervasive issue throughout  
Manet's career, 2–3
- salons littéraires* and, 300n3
- soldiering and, 43
- virility and, 104
- mask, removing the, 148–59
- masquerade, 150
- materialism, bourgeois, 164–65
- Matisse, Henri, 165, 296n4
- Maus, Eugène, 217
- Maximilian, Emperor, 47–48, 49,  
50
- meaning, 14–15, 21, 184, 194
- apparent lack of, 163–77
- double meanings, 23
- figure painting and, 175–76
- means and, 163–78
- political, 163–77
- search for, 175–76
- meaningless figures, 163–77
- Meissonier, Ernst, 295n32
- memento mori*, 224
- Menand, Louis, 281–82n1
- Merimée, Prosper, *Carmen*, 106
- Meurent, Victorine
- as model for Manet, 4, 6, 20, 62,  
67, 68, 72–77, 73, 80, 96–97,  
106–8, 107, 115, 122–23,  
127–28, 152, 153, 176–77,  
185, 186, 193, 195, 197
- portrait of, 73, 176–77
- Self-Portrait*, 112, 113
- Meurice, Paul, 88, 303–4n9
- Mexico, 48, 49
- mirror(s)/mirroring, 132–33, 142,  
143–45, 292n10, 292n11
- canvas and, 141
- concept of the, 140–48
- eyes compared to, 173
- mirror images, 140–48
- mirror play, 212
- self-portraiture and, 132–33
- as tool, 145
- mockery, 144, 159

models, 144, 188, 193–94, 200, 224, 272n9, 272n10, 289n29. *See also specific models*  
 agency of, 129  
 blank gazes of, 166–71  
 boredom of, 166  
 compared to prostitutes, 128  
 modern, myth of the, 82  
 modern man, Hamlet and, 205–11  
 modern "situation," theme of, 3  
 modernism, 82, 160, 181, 215–16, 269n4  
 modernity, 2, 41, 87, 139, 162, 175, 182, 188, 205  
 Baudelaire and, 183  
 dehumanization and, 303n4  
 democratic, 165  
 duality and, 27–28  
 Durkheim and, 27–28  
 dystopian, 165  
 industrial, 185–86  
 masculinity and, 183–84  
 self-referentiality and, 23  
 social norms of, 171  
 spleen and, 186  
 Molière (Jean-Baptiste Poquelin), 22  
 monarchists, 157, 160  
 Mondrian, Piet, 193  
 Monet, Claude, 32, 116, 119, 139, 180–82, 180, 186, 190, 293n19, 300–301n5, 300n3, 301n7  
 Monnoyer, Jean, 290n35  
 Moral Order, 156–57  
 morality, 205  
 Morisot, Berthe, 3–4, 7, 75, 94, 96, 104, 130, 134, 144, 182, 185, 196, 208, 220, 279n14, 292n11, 300–301n5  
 affection for Manet, 289–90n32

bourgeois identity of, 114, 116  
 colorism and, 133  
 etched portrait of, 126  
 as femme-fatale, 115  
 gaze of, 112, 128  
 influence on Manet, 289n29, 289n31  
 Manet's paintings of, 114–16, 114, 117, 122–24, 123, 129, 131, 176, 184  
 on Manet's revisions, 139  
 marries Eugène Manet, 115  
 masculinity and, 112–29  
*The Mother and Sister of the Artist*, 115  
*Self-Portrait*, 119, 120, 132  
 self-portraiture and, 119, 120, 131, 132, 133  
*Woman at Her Toilette*, 143, 143  
 Morisot, Edma, 104, 289n31  
 Moselle, France, 150  
 Mozart, Wolfgang Amadeus, 22  
 Musée du Louvre, 53, 61–62, 299n37

## N

Napoléon Bonaparte (Napoléon I), 30, 48, 62, 150, 160, 286–87n9  
 Napoléon III (Louis-Napoléon Bonaparte, nephew of Napoléon I), 22–23, 30, 33, 43–48, 50, 61, 152, 160, 202, 284n25, 295n32  
 Napoleonic Empire, 30  
 narcissism, 4  
 narrative, 176  
 absence of, 166–71, 192, 193  
 Manet's challenge to, 193

narrative paintings, 188, 193,  
277n1  
 naturalism, 171, 181, 183, 218  
 nature, 209  
 Neuville, Alfred de, 16, 18  
 New Caledonia, prison colony in,  
33–34  
 New Russia, 276n21  
 Nietzsche, Friedrich, 295–96n3,  
305n26  
 Nodier, Charles, 295n31  
 non-narrative painting, 166–71  
 nudity, 66, 72, 74, 75–76, 77, 109–  
12  
 Nye, Robert A., 3

## O

Oléron, 150  
 Ollivier, Émile, 276n16  
 optical realism, 164, 167  
 originality, 78, 168  
 Orléans, house of, 160  
 Ottoman Empire, 43, 276n21

## P

painting(s)  
   masculine/feminine duality  
     and, 12–13, 103  
   as mirror image(s), 140–48  
   as self-portraiture, 78  
   as theater, 51–82  
   traditional, 5  
   as window for imagination,  
171–77  
 Papety, Dominique, 163  
 paradox, 214  
 Paris, France, centrality to  
   modernity, 182

Paris Academy, 6  
 Paris Commune, 82, 151, 156–57,  
218, 233, 275n11, 289n26,  
306n8  
 Paris Municipal Council, 30  
 Paris Opéra, 18, 152  
 Parks, Malcolm, 309n10  
 parody, 77, 214  
 pastels, 226, 234  
 pensiveness, 83  
 performance, 28, 78, 83, 161–62,  
270–71n10  
   Baudelaire and, 140  
   ironic, 77–82  
   self-effacement and, 214  
 performativity, 270–71n10, 279–  
80n15  
 personae, 210–11  
 Pertuiset, Eugène, 202, 203, 203,  
224, 307n12  
 Philip IV, 206  
*philosophes*, 26  
 photography, 139, 148, 164,  
293n17  
 Picasso, Pablo, 128  
 Pichois, Claude, 284n25  
 pictorial wit, 138  
 Pierrot (formerly known as Gilles),  
53, 56  
 Pissarro, Camille, 139  
 Place de l'Alma, 88, 111  
 play within a play, 209  
 pleasure, 194  
 plein-air, 180, 180, 181, 183–90,  
194, 300–301n5  
 Poe, Edgar Allen, 85, 274n6  
 Polichinelle, 154, 155, 157, 158,  
159, 205, 211, 295n31, 295n32  
 political dissent, strategies of, 29–  
50

political satire, 151–52  
 politics, 22–23, 26, 111–12  
   oppositional, 4  
   role playing and, 150  
   satire and, 154, 156–59  
   self-referentiality and, 23  
   spectacle and, 152  
   strategies of political dissent,  
     29–50  
 politics, repressive, 2, 22–23  
 portraiture, 11, 96–97, 277n1,  
   303n5. *See also specific artists  
   and works*  
 posing, 185  
 power, 4, 7, 182  
 Prado Museum, 159  
 privilege, 150  
 the prostitute/prostitutes, 95, 143,  
   192, 198  
   as model for artist, 105  
   as performers, 105–12  
 Proudhon, Pierre-Joseph, 104,  
   163–64, 286n5, 288n19  
 Proust, Antonin, 31, 31, 33, 202,  
   217, 219, 224, 233, 273n14,  
   292n14  
 provocation, 111, 193–94  
 psychoanalysis, 29  
 Puvis de Chavannes, Pierre, 163

## R

Racine, Jean, 209  
 railway, 185, 186  
 Raphael, 77  
 reading, vs. looking, 168–69  
 Realism, 6, 36, 78, 88, 106, 110–12,  
   139–40, 157, 164–66, 181, 218,  
   277n1, 277n2, 287–88n18  
   ironic, 80  
   Manet's provocation through,  
     165  
   Spanish Realism, 61, 135–36,  
     206  
 realism, 47–48, 106, 111, 135  
   vs. artifice, 18  
   humor and, 285n33  
   vs. imagination, 179–203  
   mirror function of, 163–64  
   optical, 164, 167  
   socially beneficent realist art,  
     164–65  
   as truthful fiction staged  
     through art, 211  
 "Realism" exhibition of 1855, 103  
 reality, 209, 210, 297n15, 298n17  
   vs. appearance, 101  
   imagination and, 165–66  
 rectitude, 128  
 Rembrandt van Rijn, 11, 140  
 Renan, Ernest, *Life of Christ*, 146–  
   47  
 Renoir, Pierre-Auguste, 128, 180,  
   181  
 repression, 4  
 Republicans, 29–30, 39  
 Restoration, 30  
 revenge, 214–15  
 Revolution of 1794, 286–87n9  
 Revolution of 1848, 30, 39, 43, 104,  
   140, 275n11, 286–87n9  
 rhythm, 21  
 rights, democratization of, 104  
 Robert A. Nye, 3  
 Robinson, Tim, 205  
 Rochefort, Henri, 33–34, 34  
 Rococo, 122, 143  
 role playing, 4, 7, 61, 140, 159, 173,  
   195, 218, 252–53. *See also*  
   dissimulation; duplicity

acting and, 84–88  
 dual self and, 25, 28, 29, 44  
 gender and, 74–75, 103  
 mirroring and, 144  
 performers and, 161–62  
 politics and, 150  
 women and, 154  
 role reversal, 188  
 Romanticism, 21, 95, 163, 164,  
     171, 300n3  
 Roos, Jane Mayo, 160  
 Rosen, Georg von, 188  
 Rouart-Wildenstein catalogue  
     *raisonnée*, 226  
 Roudier, Paul, 152  
 Rouvière, Philibert, 88–95, 89, 97,  
     111, 139, 197, 212–16  
 Royalists, 150  
 Russian Empire, 43, 276n21

## S

Saint-Lazare Station, 186  
 Saint-Simon, Henri de, 163  
 salons, 82, 296n26  
     official, 105, 109, 115, 156, 157,  
         288n22, 299n37, 300–301n5  
     Salon des Refusés, 37, 66, 70,  
         74, 78, 110, 288n19, 289n26  
     *Caricature of*, 70  
     Salon in the Galerie Martinet,  
         72  
     Salon of 1855, 111  
     Salon of 1859, 56  
     Salon of 1863, 37  
     Salon of 1864, 44  
     Salon of 1866, 110, 111  
     Salon of 1867, 111  
     Salon of 1868, 111  
     Salon of 1869, 115

Salon of 1873, 122  
 Salon of 1874, 139  
 Salon of 1875, 181, 198, 289n28  
 Salon of 1877, 18  
 Salon of 1879, 34  
 Salon of 1881, 33  
     *salons littéraires*, 300n3  
 Sand, George, 104  
 Sartre, Jean-Paul, 212, 214, 281–  
     82n1, 305n25  
 satire  
     political, 151–52, 154, 156–59  
     social, 159  
 the savage, 95  
*scenes à la toilette*, 143  
 Schiller, Friedrich, 83, 135, 291n1  
 scholarship, 1  
 Second Empire, 22–23, 140, 150,  
     151, 160, 209  
     authoritarian regimes of, 6  
     censorship and, 25–50  
     opponents of, 217  
     public spectacles and, 43, 45–  
         46  
 Second Republic, 30  
 self  
     Baudelaire's theory of double,  
         28–29  
     double self, 101, 102 (*see also*  
         duality)  
     duality of, 82, 172–73  
     natural vs. performing, 28, 65,  
         282n12 (*see also*  
         performance)  
 self-consciousness, 22–23, 101,  
     159, 162, 205, 206, 208, 210, 211  
     artist's role and, 50, 81, 86  
     duality and, 28–29, 94–95, 172  
     duplicity and, 83  
     ironic, 6

- self-discipline, 105  
 self-effacement, performance  
     and, 214  
 self-fashioning, 95, 131–32, 143,  
     145  
 self-fulfillment, 83, 85  
 self-mocking, 159  
 self-portraiture, 78, 113, 119, 120,  
     131, 131, 147, 152, 160  
     challenge of, 129–34  
     Courbet and, 140  
     Faure and, 95–102  
     Manet and, 131, 132–33, 140–  
         41, 147  
     Meurent and, 112, 113  
     mirrors and, 132–33  
     Morisot and, 133, 120  
     women and, 132  
 self-presentation, 143  
 self-questioning, 172  
 self-recognition, 85, 135–62  
 self-referentiality, 23, 82  
 self-reflections, 133  
 Seurat, Georges, 128  
 sex, 200  
 sexual freedom, 104  
 Shakespeare, William, 210, 282n2,  
     284n25, 304n12  
     *Hamlet*, 95–102, 195–96, 205,  
         206, 208, 209, 210, 211  
     *Macbeth*, 215  
     popularity of, 22  
     popularity on the Continent,  
         209  
     reception of in France, 303–4n9  
     translation of, 284n25  
     tricentennial of his birth, 88  
     *As You Like It*, 83  
 silence, 184, 188  
 sister arts, 277n1  
 slavery, 286–87n9  
 social progress, 163–64  
 Sohn, Anne-Marie, 285n33  
 soldiering, manliness and, 43  
 solitude, 172–73  
 Solzhenitsyn, Alexandr, 166  
 Spain, 62  
 Spanish art, 61–62  
 Spanish costume pieces, 72, 73–74  
 Spanish culture, 61–62  
 Spanish performers, 61  
 Spanish Realism, 61, 135–36, 206  
 spectacle, 51–82, 152, 159. *See also*  
     performance  
 spleen, 166, 171, 186, 302n2  
 split self, concept of, 7  
 Stalin, Joseph, 276n21  
 Stendhal (Marie-Henri Beyle), 22,  
     210, 283n14, 298n19  
     *Racine et Shakespeare*, 209  
 still-lives, 101, 168, 170, 198, 218,  
     219–20, 223–24, 277n1, 290n35,  
     290n37, 306n9, 306n11  
 subjectivity, 171  
 subterfuge, 34–35  
 suicide, 215  
*super ego*, 29  
 Suzon, 233, 250, 251  
 synesthesia, 296–97n11  
 syphilis, 217–18, 305n30
- ## T
- Taine, Hippolyte, 170, 209,  
     297n15, 298n17, 304n11  
     *Histoire de la littérature*  
         *anglaise*, 210  
     *Philosophie de l'art*, 170,  
         297n15  
 Tatars, 276n21



Tati, Jacques, 101  
 technology, new, 186  
 temperament, 15, 77, 105, 109,  
   165–66, 169, 171, 175  
 theater, 83, 270–71n10, 304n10  
 theatricality, 270–71n10  
 Thiers, Adolphe, 150–51  
 Third Republic, 6, 22–23, 30, 150–  
   51, 151, 157, 159  
 Thomas, Ambrose, *Hamlet*, opera  
   in five acts, 16, 18–20, 19, 211,  
   272–73n11  
 Titian, *Venus of Urbino*, 109  
 tone, 21  
 tradition, 139  
 Traviès, Charles-Joesph, 56  
 Tristan, Flora, 104  
 truth, 163–64, 196  
 Tuileries Garden, 21, 277n2

## U

Ukraine, 276n21  
 Unamuno, Miguel de, *Tragic Sense  
   of Life*, 215  
 Union Républicaine, 30  
 universal male suffrage, 104  
 U.S. Civil War, 47  
 U.S. South, 47  
 utopia, 195

## V

vacancy, 173  
 Vacquerie, Auguste, 284n25  
 Valabrègue, Antony, 298n17  
 Valence, Lola de, 197  
 Van Gogh, Vincent, 147, 286n6,  
   293n18  
*vanitas*, 291n4

Velázquez, Diego, 11, 61, 62, 135–  
   36, 138, 214, 291n3  
*The Court Buffoon 'El Primo,'*  
   42, 43  
*Las Meninas*, 132  
*Los Borrachos*, or *The Drinkers*,  
   or *The Feast of Bacchus*, 56,  
   58  
*Portrait of Pablo de Valladolid*,  
   206, 207  
 Vendôme Column, 150, 157  
 Verdi, Giuseppe, *Rigoletto*, 206  
 Versailles, France, 150, 151, 161,  
   243  
 viewers, responsibility of, 175, 176  
 virility, 104, 105  
 Voltaire (Françoise-Marie Arouet),  
   303–4n9

## W

Wagner, Richard, 295–96n3  
 watercolors, 228  
 Watteau, Jean-Antoine, 53, 206  
*Pierrot* (formerly known as  
   *Gilles*), 53, 54, 56  
 Whistler, James Abbot McNeill,  
*Symphony in White, No. 1: The  
   White Girl*, 71, 72  
 windows, 173–74  
 women, 130, 286n3, 303n5  
   as "everyperson," 176  
   as model for artistic activity,  
     144–45  
   portraits of, 176–77  
   roles of, 104, 286n5  
   social class and, 200  
 world-weariness (*Weltschmerz*),  
   166  
 Wrigley, Richard, 283–84n23

## Z

- Zola, Émile, 15, 50, 108–10, 170–  
72, 175, 180, 233, 241, 280n17,  
281n23, 300n3  
on artists' temperament, 78, 94,  
165–66, 169, 171  
defense of Manet, 77–78, 81–  
82, 88, 102, 105, 111, 192–  
93  
descriptive naturalism and, 171  
Impressionists and, 300n3  
on looking vs. reading, 168–69  
*Nana*, 144, 196  
"A New Manner in Painting,"  
109  
Taine and, 298n17